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ART. XI.—*Curiosities of Literature*. By ISAAC DISRAELI. With a View of the Life and Writings of the Author. By his Son. From the Fourteenth, Corrected London Edition. Boston: William Veazie. 1859. 4 vols. Small 8vo.

NEARLY seventy years have elapsed since the first volume of the "*Curiosities of Literature*" was issued from the press; yet the work retains its popularity undiminished, and the recent appearance of two new editions, one in England and the other in this country, shows that the present generation finds in it scarcely less to interest than did the generation to which it was first offered. As a suggestive contribution to literary history, it must, indeed, always hold a respectable place among similar books; and, if it makes no attempt at searching analysis or exhaustive criticism, it embraces a more copious selection of noteworthy facts in regard to books and authors than can be found in almost any other compilation of the kind, while it doubtless owes much of its popularity with all classes of readers to the agreeable form in which these facts are presented. Thomas Moore says of it in his *Diary*, that it is "good invalid reading"; and this casual remark very happily describes the character of the work. It makes but a small demand on the reader, yet it proffers to him an almost inexhaustible fund of amusement and instruction. Availing ourselves of the opportunity afforded by the publication of the beautiful edition named above, we design now to present a brief sketch of the life and character of Mr. Disraeli, together with a revaluation of the claims of his various writings to a permanent place in English literature.

Isaac Disraeli, or D'Israeli, as the name was originally written, was the only son of a Venetian merchant of Jewish extraction, and was born in the town of Enfield, near London, in May, 1766. His first teacher was a Scotchman, who kept a preparatory school in the neighborhood, to which Disraeli was sent when a mere child; but he does not appear to have made much progress in his studies, though he even then showed a taste for poetry. This taste was developed at so early an age, it is said, that before he was fourteen he had begun to write

verse, and had greatly shocked his father by producing a poem of his own composition. He was immediately sent abroad,—as his son intimates, in the hope that change of scene would wean his mind from this unprofitable occupation; and he was consigned to the care of his father's correspondent at Amsterdam, to be placed at college in that city. Here and at Leyden he passed several years with little profit from the direct instruction which he received, but diligently reading such books as his tutor's library contained. At the age of fifteen he had read Voltaire's works, and had made some acquaintance with those of Bayle; and three years later he returned to England with his mind saturated with the sentimentalism of Rousseau.

His new opinions, however, met with a rude shock when he rushed into his mother's apartment on his arrival, and was greeted by her with derisive laughter at his gaunt figure, his long hair, and his awkward appearance. Stung by this insulting welcome, the young man stormed and wept, and finally shut himself up in his room to give expression to his feelings through his pen. It was in vain that his father sought to smooth his ruffled temper by dwelling on the solicitude of his parents for his welfare, and by offering to place him in a great commercial establishment at Bordeaux. The son's reply was, that commerce corrupts mankind, and that he had written and intended to publish a poem against it. This announcement only made matters worse, and confusion and discord once more reigned in the house. In the mean time the new aspirant for poetical honors determined to seek the advice and assistance of Dr. Johnson. He accordingly left his manuscript at the Doctor's door; but the great critic was on his death-bed, and a week later the parcel was returned unopened.

Probably the poem was never published; but in December, 1786, Disraeli communicated to the Gentleman's Magazine an essay covering four pages of that journal, and entitled "Remarks on the Biographical Accounts of the late Samuel Johnson, LL. D., with an Attempt to vindicate his Character from late Misrepresentations." This essay is believed to be his first printed production, and it enables us to form some idea of his tastes and acquirements at that time, though as a piece of criticism it is utterly worthless. Its main object was to offer some

strictures on five recent publications, in which, as Disraeli thought, the memory of Johnson had been unfairly dealt with; but these strictures, which were inspired by an extravagant admiration of Johnson, are remarkably feeble and commonplace, and the style exhibits the worst faults of a young and inexperienced writer.

The same faults are shown in a still more conspicuous manner in two letters addressed by him in the same year to Dr. Vicesimus Knox, master of Tunbridge Grammar School, and then known on both sides of the Atlantic as a distinguished essayist and theologian. These letters are composed in a very adulatory style, and the whole diction is pompous and turgid. "I am addressing myself," he writes, "to the most learned and elegant writer our nation boasts"; and his wish was to obtain admission to the Doctor's family as a student. "I am a young man," he says, "who hath beat along the ocean of letters with most miserable pilots; and if in despair of meeting with a director I snatched the helm, it hath not been so much the action of temerity as that of a desire to gain the coast. I had no other guide than that bright effluence which a few constellations of the literary hemisphere dispensed; but experience convinced me that they are insufficient lights to him who is doubtful and fearful amidst 'the multitudinous sea.'" But if he had an extravagant admiration of his correspondent, he did not have a very modest opinion of his own acquirements. "In your house alone," he writes near the close of his first letter, "shall I be thought ignorant. I have travelled into different countries, and am conversant in the modern languages and in modern literature,—that is to say, in superficial knowledge and jejune ornament; and if the style of my letter is uncommon, be pleased to recollect, Sir, that it is on a very unusual topic."

Whether this application was made with the knowledge of his parents, we are not informed; but it is certain that his father's house was still a very uncongenial home, and about this time they again thought it desirable to send him abroad. During his absence he travelled through France, and a considerable part of his time was passed in Paris, where he mingled freely in literary society, and added much to his

knowledge of general literature. In 1788 he returned to England; and shortly afterward he wrote a poetical epistle to Warton, the Poet Laureate, "On the Abuse of Satire," which was printed in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for July, 1789. This poem extends to about a hundred and fifty lines, and was designed as an attack on Dr. Wolcot, better known by his pseudonyme, Peter Pindar, and as an urgent appeal to Warton to drive Wolcot from the field by writing more poetry himself. It is modelled on the verse of Pope, has considerable spirit, and on the whole shows that its writer had acquired strength and self-reliance with his added years. Wolcot was greatly incensed at its appearance, and he at once ascribed it to the pen of Hayley, the friend and biographer of Cowper, and at that time one of the most popular of English poets. When Disraeli went up to town he found that his poem was making a noise in society, and that the newspapers were filled with comments on it, and with gossip about Wolcot and Hayley. Elated by this unexpected notoriety, he hurried home to communicate the tidings to his parents, who seem now to have become convinced that any further resistance to their son's inclinations would be fruitless.

The success of his poem doubtless exerted a large influence over Disraeli's subsequent life. It led to a warm personal friendship with Henry James Pye, Warton's successor as Poet Laureate; and by Pye's influence, the elder Disraeli was induced to consent that his son should henceforth devote himself to literary pursuits. Pye visited his young friend at Enfield, and encouraged him to persevere in the path which he had marked out; and in the following year Disraeli published his first volume. This was a versified essay in defence of satirical poetry, under the title of "A Defence of Poetry, addressed to Henry James Pye, Esq., to which is added a Specimen of a New Version of *Telemachus*." It contains some well-pointed lines; but as a whole, both the Defence and the metrical version of *Telemachus* are feeble and diffuse. Neither shows any intellectual growth since the publication of the "Abuse of Satire"; and the translation of *Telemachus* was not completed.

In the following year he published anonymously an octavo

volume of miscellaneous anecdotes, drawn from various sources, and entitled "Curiosities of Literature." This work made small pretensions to originality, but it was received with much favor; and two years afterward he published a second volume of the same character, which was equally popular. In 1817, he added a third volume, embracing a larger amount of original matter, but formed on the same plan; and in 1823 he published a second series, also in three volumes. Subsequently, these six volumes were carefully revised, and published in a new form as one work, accompanied by a Preface as full of egotism as any of Southey's letters. "These volumes," their author does not hesitate to say, "have imbued our youth with their first tastes for modern literature; have diffused a delight in critical and philosophical speculation among circles of readers who were not accustomed to literary topics; and finally, they have been honored by eminent contemporaries, who have long consulted them, and set their stamp on the metal."

Nevertheless this work has not escaped criticism; and in 1838 a small volume of *adversaria* was published by Mr. Bolton Corney, attacking Disraeli's accuracy, and convicting him of several errors. The veteran author, then more than seventy years of age, replied in a spicy pamphlet, acknowledging some mistakes which have since been corrected, but in the greater number of instances maintaining his previous statements. The controversy terminated with a brief answer by Mr. Corney; and it must be conceded that, in the main, his animadversions were fully justified by the facts before him. He had shown that Disraeli was sometimes hasty in his conclusions and careless in his language, and that he had sometimes been misled by his authorities. The work, however, did not suffer much in the general estimation, and it is still the most popular of Disraeli's productions. Nor is it probable that it will ever cease to be read with interest, for its many curious anecdotes, its graphic sketches, and its genial criticism.

For the ten years after the publication of the first volume of the *Curiosities*, the young enthusiast in literature seems to have given his pen little rest. During this period he

published his "Essay on the Manners and Genius of the Literary Character"; his "Miscellanies, or Literary Recreations"; "A Dissertation on Anecdotes"; and several novels, which are now forgotten. One of them, however, "Mejnoon and Leila," has the merit of being the first story in our language composed with the view of presenting an accurate picture of Oriental life and manners. Of these works, both the Essay on the Literary Character and the Miscellanies have retained their popularity, and both have been reprinted several times; the former, after the lapse of more than twenty years from its first appearance, was almost entirely rewritten, and was published in a new edition, in 1818, under the title of "The Literary Character, illustrated by the History of Men of Genius, drawn from their own Feelings and Confessions." In 1822 it was again much enlarged, and was further enriched by the insertion of several manuscript notes by Lord Byron, with whom the book was a favorite. It is in some respects the most systematic and elaborate of Disraeli's works, and shows a depth and range of thought which we do not find in many of his productions, while its style is manly and its illustrations are copious and well selected. The "Miscellanies" comprises a small collection of papers, similar in design and execution to many of the later essays in the *Curiosities*, but containing nothing that requires special notice.

Early in 1802 he was married to Miss Basevi, aunt of the distinguished architect of that name, with whom he lived happily for forty-five years. By this lady he had one daughter and three sons, the eldest of whom, Benjamin Disraeli, has added fresh honors to the family name by a career of remarkable brilliancy in literature and public life. For several years after his marriage, Disraeli published little or nothing, with the exception of a volume of "Narrative Poems," which appeared in quarto in 1803, without winning much notice. In 1812 and 1813 he again made his appearance as an author, and published two volumes of essays under the attractive designation of "Calamities of Authors, including some Inquiries respecting their Moral and Literary Characters." His design in this work was to show that authors receive "little encouragement and less remuneration," and that "the most success-

ful author can obtain no equivalent for the labors of his life." This is certainly a sombre view of the subject, and one that is only partially sustained by the facts of literary history ; but it is characteristic of Disraeli's mind, and clearly shows that want of breadth and comprehensiveness which is the chief defect in his writings. But in spite of the fallacious theory which these volumes were designed to illustrate, they contain many curious facts and anecdotes drawn from the literary history of England, and they have been deservedly popular.

A few months after the publication of this work, Disraeli brought out three more volumes composed on the same plan, and illustrating another division of the same general subject. To this new work he gave the title of "Quarrels of Authors ; or, Some Memoirs for our Literary History." As its title intimates, the topics discussed were exclusively English ; and in general the treatment was judicious and candid, though in some instances the author's opinions do not agree with those now held by impartial critics. Thus, in his account of the famous quarrel between Pope and Addison, he fails to render entire justice to the latter, and he repeats some misrepresentations of Pope's apologists which have since been exploded by Lord Macaulay and other writers. Among the authors whose quarrels and controversies fill the larger part of the volumes are Warburton and Pope, the two most noted literary combatants of the last century, Bentley, Hobbes, and Ben Jonson ; and there are also sketches of the controversies which grew out of the formation of the Royal Society, and some other essays of a similar character.

Thus far Disraeli's researches had been mainly directed to literary questions ; but he now determined to investigate some of the vexed questions of political history. Accordingly, he published in 1816 an "Inquiry into the Literary and Political Character of King James I." This tract was designed to rescue the character of James from the contempt into which it had fallen, and it certainly relieves his name from some undeserved obloquy, but it does not awaken any real sympathy with him, or overrule the popular judgment of his character and aims. The fact still remains, that James was an ambitious and arbitrary pedant, who entirely misunderstood the character and

temper of the English people. It should be observed, however, that Disraeli's admiration for the Stuarts was not a sudden passion, and traces of it may be found at a very early period of his life. "I *suspect*," he says in the first series of the *Curiosities*, "that James was not that degraded and feeble character in which he ranks by the contagious voice of criticism. He has had more critics than readers. After a great number of acute observations and witty allusions, made extempore, which we find continually recorded of him by contemporary writers, and some not friendly to him, I conclude that he possessed a great promptness of wit, and much solid judgment and acute ingenuity." With this view the *Inquiry* was prepared and published. On the whole, it is a well-written production, and it comprises much miscellaneous information about the life, character, and times of James. Disraeli did not, however, possess the thorough familiarity with his subject, the large powers of generalization, or the judicial habits of mind, which are now demanded in an historian, and consequently his tract is little read, and never quoted as an authority.

His next work, the "Commentaries on the Life and Reign of Charles I.," was probably suggested by the "Inquiry," though the first two volumes were not published until 1828. Two more volumes followed in 1830; and in 1832 a supplementary volume appeared under the title of "Eliot, Hampden, and Pym," in answer to some strictures on the preceding volumes. In these volumes, which have the same desultory and fragmentary character as his other writings, it was Disraeli's design to present some new views of the English Revolution, to magnify the characters of Charles and his principal advisers, and to depreciate the services of the popular leaders. The attempt was not very successful; no one now reads the "Commentaries," or entertains a different opinion of the Revolution in consequence of its publication; and probably no work of equal research and ability ever influenced public opinion less. Yet at the time it was received with great favor by the Tories, who were then smarting under the passage of the Roman Catholic Relief Bill, and in fearful anticipation of the grant of Parliamentary Reform; and, true to her first love, the University of Oxford testified her gratitude *optimi*

regis optimo vindici, by conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Civil Law. The work does indeed show much research, and sets some transactions in a new light by the help of documents unknown to previous writers, or not accessible to them ; but it is the work of a partisan, and the theory which it is designed to uphold cannot be successfully defended.

Disraeli's next work was of a very different character, and was a grave and eloquent dissertation on the "Genius of Judaism," expounding at length the principal causes which have separated the Jews from every other nation, and long made them a special object of hatred. In dealing with the fundamental distinctions of his ancestral faith, and in recording some pages in the history of the "peculiar people," Disraeli had a subject well suited to his powers ; and the volume comprises some very striking and admirable passages. But it has not been much read, and we are not aware that it has been reprinted since the publication of the second edition, immediately after its first appearance. This work affords one of the best specimens of Disraeli's style, and exhibits his intellect in its full maturity. He was now, however, fast approaching the allotted term of human existence ; he had acquired a considerable reputation ; his books were widely read, and some of them had been often reprinted ; but he was still vigorous in body and mind, and he was reluctant to withdraw from labors which had afforded him many delights, in spite of his theory as to the calamities of authors. No sooner had one volume left the press, than he began to plan another ; and he now turned his thoughts once more to a new subject.

It did not enter into his design in early life to present a comprehensive survey of the literature of a particular period, such as Mr. Hallam has given us, or to do for English literature what our own countryman, Mr. Ticknor, has done with consummate ability for the literature of Spain. For such a task he had neither the breadth of culture, the patient industry, nor the impartiality of judgment which those eminent writers brought to the performance of their respective labors. Nevertheless, his principal works, with the exception of the "Commentaries on the Life and Reign of Charles I.," must be regarded as contributions to such a general survey of the pro-

gress of modern literature. They all belong to the department of literary history, and most of them are intended to illustrate some special phase of literary life and character; and it was doubtless his perception of this fact which induced him, when nearly seventy years of age, to form the plan of a History of English Literature. This work he hoped to complete in six volumes, and he at once set about its execution with much zeal. But he had made little progress when an affection of the optic nerve deprived him of sight, and prevented the further prosecution of his undertaking. The operation of couching was performed without affording relief; and he at length determined to relinquish his design, and to content himself with publishing a selection from the materials which he had collected. In this work he was assisted by his daughter, whose services were rendered with a cheerfulness and assiduity deserving of the warmest recognition. The result was the publication of three volumes of miscellanies, under the title of "Amenities of Literature," comprising a series of independent essays more or less directly connected with the history of English literature.

These volumes were published in 1841; and in his Preface Disraeli gratefully acknowledges the assistance received from "the affectionate patience of filial devotion." From the manner in which the volumes were prepared, they have a very fragmentary character; but they contain much just criticism, and exhibit a higher order of powers than is shown in most of his other works. They open with an essay on "The Druidical Institution," and end with one on "The War against Books"; and among the authors noticed are Chaucer, Sir Philip Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Bacon. These papers show a great familiarity with the works of our older writers, a discriminating taste, and considerable power of analysis. The style is clear and forcible, and, though marked by little or no ornament, it gives no signs of old age. Yet the work has never equalled the "Curiosities of Literature" in popularity, and its fragmentary character will probably cause it to be forgotten long before its less ambitious and elaborate precursor.

This was the last production of his pen, and with its publication Disraeli closed a literary career which had extended

over a period of fifty years from the appearance of his first printed essay. He was enabled, however, with the help of his daughter, to revise his work on Charles I., and to prepare a new edition of it for the press. In her society, and in this congenial occupation, his years glided away with scarcely any apparent abatement of his physical vigor; and he had nearly attained his eighty-second year when he was attacked by the influenza, at that time an epidemic in England. The attack proved fatal, and on the 19th of January, 1848, after a short illness, he died at his residence, Bradenham House, Buckinghamshire, where he had passed the last twenty years of his life. He was buried in Bradenham church, among the descendants of the Hampdens and other illustrious families whose names are indissolubly associated with the history of that famous county. On the day before he was seized with his last illness, he was informed by his publisher that all his works were out of print; and since his death new editions of the more important of them have been published by his son.

In attempting to measure the mental capacity of Mr. Disraeli, and to determine his relative rank in English literature, we must not overlook the circumstance that his early education was very defective, and that his mind was not trained by any severe discipline. Without the countenance of his parents or the advice of judicious literary friends, at a time when such countenance and advice would have been of the utmost value, he read in a desultory manner, and followed the prompting of his own inclination, as far as he was able. Accordingly he wrote poetry, essays, and fiction, without any definite plan for his literary life. Yet he was among the first who made literary history a study; and notwithstanding the disadvantages under which he labored, he attained an honorable position among his contemporaries; his books were popular; and he had the reputation of being a well-read scholar. This reputation has somewhat declined; but it will not be denied that he had a very extensive acquaintance with English and Continental literature, and that he neglected no opportunity for self-culture.

He was, however, a man of facts and details, rather than a man of principles. He had little power of generalization or

of sustained reasoning, and he rarely took a comprehensive view of any subject. Hence his works are, almost without exception, fragmentary in form. They are replete with curious and amusing information, but the facts seldom have an orderly and systematic arrangement, or illustrate any central idea. His books, indeed, must be regarded as collections of materials, rather than as elaborate treatises, and their real value consists in the variety and interest of the details of author-life which they embody. Disraeli, as we have intimated, lacked a judicial habit of mind, and like most antiquaries he was disposed to magnify the importance of his researches, and to regard every circumstance which had escaped the notice of previous writers as a piece of secret intelligence. This weakness subjected him to some undeserved criticism, and it is probably one of the causes which have tended to diminish his reputation.

In early life his style was florid and pompous, but as he advanced in years it gained clearness and force, and his later works, the "Genius of Judaism" and the "Amenities of Literature," contain many passages of genuine eloquence. In the former of these, in particular, he writes with a dignity and polished grace which no one could have predicted from his earlier poems and essays. All his works in illustration of literary history, however, are composed in an attractive and popular style; and they owe scarcely less to this circumstance than to the exceeding richness of their materials.

In his political opinions he was conservative; but he took little part in the discussion of contemporary politics, except to advocate the removal of the Jewish disabilities. In literature his taste was catholic, and his critical judgments are in general candid and impartial. He had few literary antipathies, and Horace Walpole is almost the only writer for whom he entertained a deep and settled aversion on purely literary grounds. His habits through the greater part of life were those of a student, and he made diligent use of the advantages which his father's wealth enabled him to procure. "In London," his son says, "his only amusement was to ramble among book-sellers; if he entered a club, it was only to go into the library. In the country he scarcely ever left his room, but to saunter in

abstraction upon a terrace, muse over a chapter, or coin a sentence." So intense was this devotion to books, that he seems never to have allowed himself time for social intercourse, and during the greater part of the day and evening he was separated from his family, even marriage producing no change in this respect.

The life of Disraeli forms a connecting link between the age of Johnson and our own times. His writings, however, ally him with the former period rather than with the latter; for though most of them were published after the commencement of this century, they belong, both in form and spirit, to the literature of the eighteenth century. His poetry, which is the least valuable part of his works, was inspired by the genius of Pope, and it has the characteristic faults of Pope's imitators. His criticism, though for the most part genial, lacked the philosophical breadth and the penetrating analysis which were shown by Coleridge and the Edinburgh Reviewers. His historical productions had the same defects as his criticism, and were mere records of facts, without any systematic attempt to show the relation of causes and effects. In a word, neither as a poet, as an essayist, nor as an historian, does he exhibit the characteristics which belong to recent writers in the same departments of literary endeavor; and when judged by the standard of the nineteenth century, his writings do not take a very high rank. But if we apply to them the standard by which we estimate the minor writers of the last century, his real merits will be more readily perceived, and he will be found to occupy a very creditable position.

ART. XII. — "*Woman's Right to Labor*"; or, *Low Wages and Hard Work. In Three Lectures, delivered in Boston, November, 1859.* By CAROLINE H. DALL. Boston: Walker, Wise, & Co. 1860. 16mo. pp. 184.

TAKE the past together, and woman has had but little to say publicly. Until of late she has hardly put enough on record,